South Africa's Foreign Policy for Sale?

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By Chris Landsberg and Richard Smith

Over the past few years we have been concerned about the stock response, both from inside and outside government, to some aspects of the articulated International Relations agenda of South Africa, which is premised on a new utilitarian, crude economic driven response. Some critics go so far as to paint our involvement on the continent as purely part of a sub-imperialist agenda. Both domestically and abroad, it has been said that South Africa is pursuing a narrow national interest-driven foreign policy. And because of this quest to promote the narrow national interest, decision-makers have made it easy for elements of South African capital, including champions of BEE, to take advantage of the access to opportunities provided by the role South Africa has been playing on the continent. In this aspect, foreign policy has become a tool for elite and sectarian rather than national and continental interests.

While it has not necessarily been the intention of the South African International Relations department to function solely as a provider of such self-interested opportunities, elites close to the ruling class and others see foreign policy as an instrument to advance their narrow business interests, as was the case in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the Central African

Republic (CAR) and other countries.

Narrow self-interest is now thinly disguised as "the national interest". The President and the Minister of Trade and Industry have vowed that "South Africa is open for business…in a big way". The unintended consequence of the "Open for business" strategy is that our international relations agenda is based on propping up business opportunities at the expense of the citizens in the countries on which it focuses.

To be sure, a twenty year assessment would suggest that there is more to South Africa's foreign policy and diplomacy than crude utilitarian, self-interest drivers. We would support a school of thought that suggests that South Africa has made huge gains in relation to the ability of Africa to deal more effectively with the sources of violence and armed conflict that are at the core of poverty and underdevelopment. This must surely be the primary area of concern for all solidarity activists.

There have been many instances in which South Africa has pursued a foreign policy agenda that was fuelled on paper, and in many instances also in practice, by a notion of putting people at the centre, with a specific focus on Africa, on the need for solidarity, for acting multi-laterally, and for seeing peace, stability and security as the key pillars of its policy. South Africa has pushed hard for genuine partnerships with the outside world; not some old, and exploitative paternalism.

Successive ANC led administrations have put the national interest driven idea centre stage and argued for a cognitive shift in which foreign policy is seen as an opportunity, both for engagement and as providing entry points for leveraging the progressive implementation of what is clearly a value driven international relations agenda, at least on the policy level. They went further, to argue that their international agenda was responding well to the key drivers of conflict and under-development on the continent, so it must surely have some merit. There is a contradiction and tension here that government should be mindful of, and seek to reconcile. National interest considerations should be there, and need to be recognised upfront. But this should be squared with important values and principles which the ruling party holds dear, and which have shaped its global standing for decades.

But is South Africa really as committed to conflict resolution, development, co-operation, governance and stability as it would have us believe? Without attempting to give a comprehensive analysis of all of the forms of conflict currently affecting the African continent, this outline seeks to point to areas where there is an apparent shift in the dynamics of conflict, out of which new forms of conflict and an escalation of tension appear to be emerging. This exacerbates existing areas of ongoing concern.

These shifting forms of conflict raise particular challenges for the regional and continental efforts to build an effective African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) initiated by the African Union Commission. The gaps and challenges that have been identified in the responses to these forms of conflict have direct implications for the role of South Africa and other African states in finding a complementary set of strategies and inform the direction of the APSA.

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The conflict triggers and the gaps and weaknesses of current approaches outlined here all occur within the context of a continent that is still caught up in an ongoing cycle of protracted social conflict. The mediated outcomes that have sought to bring an end to violence have often not been able to effectively contain the residual forms of tension that accompany political and economic periods of transition. The effect of change processes on communities inevitably leads to volatile contexts in which local level disputes can quickly spiral into widespread forms of escalated tension and violence. External interventions and destabilising tactics used by external powers have served to render parts of the continent ungovernable in many instances.

Several contexts across Africa continue to be characterised by residual conflicts and tension connected to poorly managed transitional processes, including mismanaged demobilisation and integration programmes for combatants, ineffective reconciliation efforts, inappropriate inherited colonial borders and an insensitive handling of transitional justice issues. Interventions in Libya, Cote d'Ivoire, Mali, Somalia and others have spread extremism and violence.

While South Africa has been a staunch proponent of mediated and negotiated solutions, the Republic's foreign policy has not sufficiently recognised the fragility of state institutions and structures, and how central these are to understanding why so many mediated outcomes do not appear to be able to prevent communities and national contexts from slipping back into recurring cycles of violent crisis. Post-colonial states have for the most part been unable to transform weak, ineffective and partisan social, economic, political and judicial systems, inherited from a colonial era of domination. In some instances the systems that were designed to divide and rule have been adapted to be used in post-colonial contexts for the purposes of maintaining control.

With millions of people living in poverty on the continent, growing economic inequality appears to be exacerbated by unequal economic development and high levels of unemployment. The conditions are rife to make people, and youth in particular, vulnerable to external manipulation by stakeholders who benefit from the instability and the lawlessness that often accompanies periods of violence. The devastating effect of war and violence on the webs of social relationships that enable human agency compounds the complexity of this challenge. The impact of violence has also had specific

and different long-term debilitating effects on men, women and children.

Sections of the population are often manipulated by those who seek to take advantage of ethnic differences or to use polarised party political systems to deepen the differences between groups and mobilise people around destructive agendas. Interest groups use these strategies to shift forms of ownership and control or to destabilise the situation in order to take economic advantage.

Within these conditions Africa has also been affected by a rise in other forms of extremism, including those developed around religious, faith based or identity related agendas. In an increasingly polarised world African conflicts are also influenced by the use of large-scale military operations in response to acts of violence, and to the use of fear tactics and terror, which often deepen divisions and fan the flames of conflict.

Conditions are ripe in Africa for increasingly violent forms of conflict and a rise in extremism. This could become part of the strategy and tactics used by those who seek to undermine state institutions and structures. The increased militarisation of Africa and the growing military presence of the United States, through the Africa Command Structure AFRICOM, and direct military intervention by NATO allies in African conflicts, including France, Britain and other former colonial powers, is also a source of major concern that feeds into and fuels violent forms of conflict. The US now has a military presence in some 30 African states.

The accelerated scramble to control and exploit African mineral resources, under the banner of Africa as "the new frontier", and the "new growth point, indeed the new playground", has also raised the stakes for affected communities. Seldom accruing much benefit from the resource-related development that takes place, communities are also often vulnerable to being relocated or to having natural resources such as forests and water, which are essential to their forms of livelihood, polluted or destroyed.

The phenomenon of rents and rent seeking in relation to natural resource exploitation, whereby related activities generate profits that are much higher than the minimum level of costs required to keep activities going, encourages the emergence of corrupt systems that undermine efforts to build stability. The mineral resource sector in particular creates the conditions for dysfunctional politics wherein instability becomes the self-serving paradigm of those who stand to gain economically from loose or non-existent regulatory mechanisms, and these exploiters include and involve both African and non-African external actors.

In addition, natural resources provide an obvious source of financing for rebel groups who become trapped in war economies, and South Africa's new-found focus on "an open for business" paradigm in foreign policy could fuel this culture of exploitation for the gain of small pockets of elites. Many African states endowed with an abundance of natural and other resources are turned into "war economies", and instead of a positive asset, the possession of resources become a "curse". This in turn is used by some to instigate and perpetuate cycles of violence and instability that use illicit resource accumulation to finance armed conflict. This encourages armed groups to secure access to and control over lucrative resource opportunities that are made more lucrative under unstable conditions.

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Shifts in power at the global geopolitical level, and in Africa, have also accelerated the externally-driven scramble for resources. As China and other BRICS countries begin to assert a more aggressive economic presence in Africa, the previous dominance of traditional colonial powers, including France, the United Kingdom and other member states of the European Union, has been challenged. The economic opportunities that accompany political influence and resource control and the incentive this provides to work outside of weak and ineffectual systems cannot be delinked from the forces driving instability, inter-state conflicts and undemocratic or unconstitutional changes in leadership at national and local levels.

Ownership transfers and the accumulation of large-scale land tracts as well as changes in land ownership systems are also a source of conflict and a contributing factor to the conflict landscape. The further economic and social marginalisation of vulnerable communities that often accompanies land transfers exacerbates the conditions for escalated tension. These forms of conflict are becoming increasingly prevalent.

The democratisation agenda, and the rapid introduction of polarising forms of multi-party politics into systems that are not prepared to manage the resulting tensions also raises levels of tension. The heightened politicisation of all spheres of government which accompanies polarised party politics is often compounded when the private sector is weak and the state dominates most forms of economic activity. Escalated tensions and conflicts related to economic control, as well as within the relationship between the state and organised labour, and within the relations between the state, the private sector and industry also appear to be on the rise.

Current electoral models, including those that encourage a winner-takes-all approach and those focused on power politics that build support around personalities and identity or ethnicity linked political parties often become flashpoints for violence.

State failure to effectively deliver on social services also creates the conditions for violent forms of conflict linked to the mobilisation of a frustrated and dissatisfied citizenry. While this is often the result of a lack of capacity within the state, it is also sometimes caused by a deliberate intention to marginalise the needs of specific groups of people. These conflicts are also connected to a lack of transparency over how and why decisions are made, and a breakdown or absence of inclusive and effective dialogue processes.

The resulting tensions and the forms of community organisation that emerge around these structural and systemic failures, and the frustration and anger that accompanies the dominant unequal development trajectories of most African countries, is an important emerging form of conflict that requires urgent attention. The relationship between the state and its citizens is central to this element. The combination of economic migration, prejudice against migrant communities, tight competition for scarce resources and inadequate service delivery systems provide a further example of a rising conflict trend that needs to be more holistically addressed.

A key focus then on building the African Union, the Regional Economic Communities and the African Peace and Security Architecture of the AUC Peace and Security Department would seem to be essential if, as a solidarity lens suggests, the conflicts across the continent affect not only those directly involved but all of us as Africans.

The role South Africa plays out at an international diplomatic level in Africa should be fuelled by 4 key areas:

- dialogue and quiet diplomacy;
- power sharing rather than a winner takes all system;
- an approach to justice that is restorative rather than retributive or vindictive; and
- building capable, developmental states in Africa.

These four areas would all appear to be useful strategic responses to the above analysis that would also fit well within a longer term conflict transformation agenda.

We are not convinced that a more robust assertion of a Human Rights agenda and the adoption of a moral high ground would prove any more effective at trying to curtail rights abuses and the exploitative use of power by undemocratic leaders. While we would support a more outspoken and principled stance against the abuse of power where it does occur we think an international relations approach in favour of mediated solutions to conflict may be more effective in the longer term than the megaphone diplomacy and carrying the big stick that some are calling for. But this approach also presupposes that South Africa will continue to commit to peace and security and helping to end deadly conflicts.

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A potentially powerful strategy, not only for South Africa but for the continent as a whole, would involve connecting the international relations policy drivers to the need for African unity and an integrated African economy. This would enable Africa to challenge and reform a global power structure that continues to marginalise African interests and to exploit the relative vulnerability of the continent, economically, politically and socially. Reform of the UN Security Council, and the building of South-South connections offers opportunities to challenge the historical global balance of power that has certainly not been very supportive of African interests to date.

Finally, while clearly the current global economic trajectory, into which South Africa fits, is designed to benefit a predatory elite and not the majority, it is unlikely that any international relations agenda would enable South Africa to opt out of this system any time soon and choose an alternative economic path. Building alternative forms of power, through a multi-lateral solidarity driven agenda, and strengthening international governance systems which could hold powers to account for their actions would appear to be a sound strategy for slowly shifting power. This could put in place the building blocks for propagating and driving alternative economic systems. These could be designed to achieve a major redistribution of the benefits currently accruing to only a few.

While socio-economic imperatives of foreign policy remain vital and should be supported and welcomed, there is a broader agenda of peace and security, governance and democratisation, development, and international co-operation that should continue to inform South Africa’s foreign policy and diplomatic engagements. Civil society organisations and academic and research institutions should move away from a ‘holier than thou’ attitude, stop promoting the agendas of foreign governments and becoming more engaged as they interact with the Department of International Relations and Co-operation (DIRCO), the Presidency and other agencies. They should strive to help to inform foreign policy without fearing co-option and loss of independence. They should think through how civic strategies might strengthen a more constructive agenda with short-term and long-term intentions.

As for government, it should guard against the dangers of pursuing elements of a narrow, self-interested, utilitarian foreign policy approach that is bent on serving the motives of small elites and adopt a more robust, thought-through approach.

The government’s foreign policy should not be for sale to the highest bidder and for unethical contracts and deals. Values still have a vital role to play in our foreign policy. ■